

We Don't Get What We Deserve

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Matthew 20: 1 – 16

8-23-30

It is a joy to be with you this morning—to worship with you and to preach. I am thankful to have the opportunities this church has afforded me as a student, and for the opportunity to serve you this past summer during the sabbatical period. I also look forward to the opportunity that lies ahead, serving as the minister of youth and young adult beginning this fall.

As we have heard the last couple of weeks, we are a healthy community. We are filled to the brim with promise and possibility. God is with us; enduring with us as we continue to live out our faith. Our lay leadership is with us, bringing energy and vision to the transition and transformation of this church. The region and the denomination are with us, providing us with resources and guidance.

On top of all of that, we also have the very subject of our sabbatical to lean on: our mission statement. And so we will be finishing our exploration of the sabbatical this month by focusing on sharing and service. Not to be confused with Sharon Service. Sharing and service.

Our mission statement reads:

We are called to:

welcome people into a loving and caring church family;

equip people with a Christ-centered faith that works in real life;

share God's love for us through compassionate service to others.

We are called to be Community... Christian.... Church.

Our sermon text this morning comes from the Gospel of Matthew. It is a compelling parable for us to consider as we engage what it means to share in God's love. Let us read together:

Matthew 20:1-16

Prayer: God be with us now as we listen together for your voice. Give to us ears to hear and eyes to see. Bless the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts that they may be pleasing unto You, our Rock and Redeemer. *Amen.*

Turn to your neighbor this morning and say, “We don't get what we deserve.”

We don't get what we deserve... Have you ever experienced something so good, you've had to say to yourself: “What did *I* ever do to deserve *this*?” Maybe you were savoring a rich, delicious piece of cake. Or maybe you were looking out over a sparkling vista of water shimmering in the setting sun.

We don't get what we deserve... Have you ever experienced something so terrible, so awful that you've had to say to yourself: “What did *I* ever do to deserve *this*?” Maybe you were changing a flat tire in the driving rain on the side of the highway. Or maybe your heart was wrenched by the sudden news of a loved one passing away.

We don't get what we deserve...

I've been told that parenthood is one of those “What did I ever do to deserve this?” kind of experiences. I've been told that seeing your child for the first time, holding her in your arms, or watching him close his eyes as a fragile, trusting infant, is one of the most blessed, beautiful experiences possible—and you have to ask yourself: “What did I ever do to deserve this?” And I've been told, also, that at 3am in the morning, when that same ball of joy is screaming at the top of her lungs and in your sleep-deprived daze you find yourself changing a diaper filled with more infant by-product than is humanly possible; that you also ask yourself: “What did I *ever* do to deserve this?”

The parable Jesus tells in our Scripture passage this morning brings us to this very question: What do we deserve? Yet it's a strange parable. It challenges our expectations. It's strange and it challenges our expectations because, in the end, work is not given its due—the workers get what they don't deserve.

The laborers who were hired first and worked the whole day were given the same payment as those hired last, only working a short time. If pay is a reward for work, we might reason, then these workers do not deserve *the same* amount, since they did not work for *the same* amount of time. Yet that is what they all received, the same amount, a denarius, regardless of the work they did. So it seems the last workers did not get what they deserved—they were given *more* than what they deserved.

Wouldn't you grumble? If you were hired first and discovered that you had been paid the same amount as those “other guys” who only worked a short time, wouldn't you be upset? I probably would be. Every time I read this story I identify with those first workers who grumble... I'd grumble too.

I'd grumble because I see myself as a hard worker. And I know what hard workers deserve—I know what I deserve. What I deserve is based on another set of stories. These are popular stories of hard work, discipline, and “responsibility.” They are the stories of sacrifice and thinking ahead. They are the stories of rising above our circumstances, no matter how difficult life is. In these stories, if you work hard, make the right decisions, and maintain discipline, then in the end you get what deserve—your just reward.

We've all heard our fair share of these stories. These are stories woven into the fabric of American life. They include rags to riches stories—stories of poor people rising above their lot in life, pursuing their dreams, and finally making it big. They are stories that often capture our imaginations. If you've seen the movie *In Pursuit of Happyness* you know just how inspiring and gripping these stories can be. A man in the midst of homelessness struggles to care for his son and find a job. He rises above all the adversity that comes his way to receive what he rightly deserves—enormous wealth. His hard work and perseverance pays off in the end.

There are countless other stories: Andrew Carnegie, John Rockefeller, Oprah Winfrey, Jim Carrey, and on and on and on. The focus of these popular stories is the individual, the hard-working, tenacious individual who rises above the odds with unbreakable will power. An article on Forbes.com writes that the majority of the “world's 946 billionaires made their fortunes from scratch, relying on grit and determination, and not good genes.” The article uses terms like “self-made” and “bootstrapping.”¹ Anyone can “make themselves,” so the story goes, if they simply use discipline, work hard, and make responsible decisions. You will get what you deserve—you just have to commit and do the work.

I remember an interview several months after the 2008 Summer Olympic Games with 8-time Olympic

1 See the June 26, 2007 article by Tatiana Serafin entitled “Rags to Riches Billionaires” at <http://www.forbes.com/2007/06/22/billionaires-gates-winfrey-biz-cz_ts_0626rags2riches.html>

Gold Medal winner, Michael Phelps. He was promoting his book *No Limits*.² When asked if he thought that his Olympic success was repeatable, he proclaimed that “if you put your mind to it, anything is possible.” Even when asked if there was some natural talent he had that would make it truly impossible for just anyone to do what he did, he claimed that anything is possible—you simply have to put your effort and mind into the task. Good news, _____, you too can be an Olympic swimmer; all you have to do is try hard enough. After all, you will get what you deserve, right? Hard work equals success.

I could list all the freakish natural qualities that make Michael Phelps particularly suited for his task as a swimmer. But focusing on the individual is precisely what stories of Rags to Riches, or Hard Work and Discipline, or Positive Thinking, all seem to do. They focus on the individual and notions that we are “self-made.” Just work hard enough or think positively enough—then you’ll get your just desserts.

This brand of individualism and a “you get what you deserve” mentality is one we are all prone to adopt. We are susceptible to it because it saturates popular American culture. We get what we deserve. Successful people deserve their success because they have done the work to be successful.

The flipside of this story is that people who are not successful are then considered with the same mentality. They wouldn’t be poor, or a nobody, or unhappy if they had just made better decisions, or done the work, or acted responsibly. They must be lazy. After all, we get what we deserve.

But this is a way of thinking that quickly breaks down—there are things in life we do not totally deserve; there are things in life that come our way that we do not have so much control over that we can simply work hard enough or think positively enough—the “you get what you deserve mentality” operates on a hyper-individualism; it is a kind of individualism where the only person with any power is the individual person. But this is not how the world works. There are things in this life over which we do not have total control. We’ve all been there, we know.

We don’t deserve to be let go because of “the economy”; we don’t deserve to lose the people we love; we don’t deserve to be abused, or neglected, or discouraged. Sometimes hard work, discipline, and positive thinking simply do not yield the success or the life we expect. We know, we’ve been there. Sometimes we get what we don’t deserve.

And that’s what our story from the Matthew opens up for us. Jesus is telling us all a story that shows us we are recipients of something we don’t entirely deserve: God’s abundant love, God’s Grace. Those that have worked long and hard, who have labored doing God’s work, and those that have just happened on the scene; all receive God’s abundant love, God’s Grace.

In the end, the very question, “what did I do to deserve this?” may be the wrong response. We don’t make ourselves. We are not self-made. God’s generosity makes us. God’s abundance makes us. God’s love in Christ makes us.

It is easy for us to overlook that the landowner in the parable actually employed each of the workers who were all idle at first. The laborers did not make themselves. The landowner helped make each of the laborers who they were—vineyard workers—then rewarded them equally, despite the different situations they were in. So too God helps make us, we are not entirely self-made.

2 See his interview with Stephen Colbert on The Colbert Report at <<http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/213742/december-11-2008/michael-phelps>>

The good news this morning is that no matter where you find yourself in life, you are living with God's Love, Jesus Christ, the one who endured crucifixion on a cross—the one who is present in the depths of what we do not deserve. The good news this morning is also that we are living with Christ in the heights of what we do not deserve, for Christ was resurrected from the grave. God is everywhere we don't deserve because Christ has been and continues to be everywhere we don't deserve to be.

Yes we don't get what we deserve. We get so much more. Thanks be to God. *Amen.*